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United States
Department of
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Food Safety
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Service

Meat and Poultry
Hotline Staff

January 1999

Making the Connection, 1997



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USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline



Making the Connection: Activity Report of the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline for 1997

About the Meat and Poultry Hotline

The Meat and Poultry Hotline is a toll-free telephone service that helps consumers prevent foodborne illness, specifically by answering their questions about safe storage, handling, and preparation of meat, poultry, and egg products. The Hotline also responds to other issues related to the mission of the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), which is to ensure that the Nation's commercial supply of meat, poultry, and egg products is safe, wholesome, and correctly labeled and packaged, as required by the Federal Meat Inspection Act, the Poultry Products Inspection Act, and the Egg Products Inspection Act.

The Meat and Poultry Hotline, in operation since 1985, has been an effective educational tool for several reasons. First, the Hotline gives consumers quick and easy access to the Department of Agriculture and an opportunity to ask questions or express opinions. (Callers may choose to listen to recorded messages, available 24 hours a day, or they may call during operating hours and speak with a food safety specialist.)

Because they deal one-on-one with callers, Hotline food safety specialists are able to assess the caller's knowledge of safe food handling and provide appropriate guidance. Talking consumers through a difficult or puzzling situation helps them choose the safest food-handling alternatives, thus reducing the risk of illness. Specialists also assist callers by clearing up misconceptions about food safety and food industry practices.

In an emergency situation—an outbreak of foodborne illness, a natural disaster, or a product recall—the Hotline provides vital information in a timely manner. For example, in the event of a product recall, consumers can obtain detailed information that will help them identify the suspect product.

Its nationwide service area also means that the Meat and Poultry Hotline can help detect possible public health threats. Certainly the data gathered by the Hotline helps FSIS discern gaps in consumer knowledge. In essence, the Hotline callers serve as a focus group. Analysis of caller questions and concerns allows FSIS to plan effective educational campaigns.

Finally, the Hotline is able to disseminate information widely through a variety of channels. Consumers are the primary users of the Meat and Poultry Hotline, but by no means the only ones. When writers, reporters, and educators obtain help and information from FSIS and the Hotline, that information is passed in turn to readers or clients who may number in the millions. Hotline callers also include government officials; people in the food industry and foodservice workers; students and teachers; other USDA employees, such as those in the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service; consumer groups; and professionals in health, consumer affairs, and law.

Hotline Accomplishments, 1997

In 1997, the Meat and Poultry Hotline provided direct answers to specific consumer questions on a wide variety of food safety issues. Many calls reflected basic food handling concerns, often related to seasonal celebrations. In addition, the Hotline addressed concerns about the safety of the Nation's food supply, covering such topics as meat inspection reform, *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 testing; premature browning of ground beef; bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, the so-called "mad cow disease"); and product recalls. In August, during the largest meat recall in history, which involved frozen ground beef patties, the Hotline contracted with a service bureau to augment its call-handling capacities. As a result, more than 185,000 calls reached the Hotline during the year ending December 31. Food safety specialists spoke with more than 37,000 callers during business hours, recording data that were used for trend analysis.

One of the year's highlights was the November 25, 1997, visit to the Hotline by Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman. The Secretary personally answered several Hotline calls. The event generated interest in the Hotline among the reporters in attendance, and crews from two major television networks subsequently returned for filming and interviews.

In addition to its consumer calls, the Hotline handled 574 calls from the media and information multipliers. To further assist this group of constituents, the Hotline issued news feature stories, fact sheets, and video news releases. Information kits containing several "Food Safety Focus" or "Food Safety Feature" titles were mailed periodically to several thousand newspaper and magazine food and health editors, and also to some consumer affairs professionals. Publications developed by the Hotline were also posted to the FSIS' Web site (<http://www.fsis.usda.gov>) for wider distribution.

Food Safety from Farm to Table—the National Food Safety Initiative

In his January 25, 1997, radio address, President Clinton announced he would request funding for a nationwide food safety initiative. The President directed the Secretary of Agriculture, Secretary of Health and Human Services, and Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to identify specific steps to improve the safety of the food supply. In the report to the President issued in May 1997, several steps were identified in the area of education to be completed in that fiscal year.

The initiative engaged all parts of FSIS; the Food Safety Education and Communications Staff—including the Meat and Poultry Hotline—contributed significantly to several of the activities. Among these were the establishment of a public-private partnership for food safety education; research to identify barriers to safe food handling, upon which educational programs will be centered; and expansion of existing information systems (like the Hotline), while laying the groundwork for a National Clearinghouse for Food Safety Education.

The public-private partnership's educational campaign was announced on October 24 by Secretary Glickman and Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala. The campaign is centered around "Four Simple Steps to Fight BAC!™." BAC is a character representing bacteria, "the invisible enemy ready to strike" and cause foodborne illness. In 1997, the Meat and Poultry Hotline supported "Fight BAC!™" by structuring its media outreach around the four

tenets of the campaign—clean, separate, cook, and chill. More information is available on the Fight BAC!™ Web site, <http://www.fightbac.org>.

Caller Concerns, 1997

Recall of Hudson Frozen Beef Patties

On August 12, 1997, Hudson Foods voluntarily recalled about 20,000 pounds of frozen ground beef patties distributed nationwide. Colorado health officials had identified cases of *E. coli* O157:H7 infection in late July; laboratory testing confirmed that 5 of 16 cases of illness were linked to frozen beef patties produced by Hudson on June 5, 1997. This prompted USDA to call for the voluntary recall.

It was later determined that beef burgers produced on June 6 included meat left over from the June 5 production implicated in the outbreak. Therefore, on August 15, FSIS determined that the recall should be expanded to 1.2 million pounds. Because the company was unable to satisfy USDA, based upon their records, that remaining product posed no threat to public health, the recall was ultimately expanded to include all product—an estimated 25 million pounds.

The Meat and Poultry Hotline, using the resources of a contractor from August 16-September 2, reported approximately 30,500 customer contacts (including both calls answered by specialists and recorded messages played). The addition of a large number of inbound lines allowed almost unlimited access to the recorded messages, which contained the information needed to identify the recalled product.

During the outsourcing (third-party management), the Hotline's own in-house phone system was able to accommodate the transfer of 7,741 of 27,363 incoming calls. Hotline specialists, working extended hours, spoke with approximately 4,674 consumers. Most of the questions and comments heard on the Hotline were related to one of these general areas:

- codes on the recalled product, and how to locate them;
- repackaged burgers (original packaging gone);
- allegations that eating a hamburger caused illness;
- concern that other foods were contaminated or recalled;
- symptoms of *E. coli* O157:H7 illness; what to do if someone became ill.

In addition to answering questions, the Hotline staff forwarded nearly 100 complaints of alleged illness to the Office of Public Health and Science, Food Hazard Surveillance Division (OPHS/FHSD), for investigation. Despite the large number of consumer complaints, no additional illnesses associated with exposure to the recalled product were detected by OPHS/FHSD.

BSE, Advanced Meat Recovery Systems, and Rendering Practices

Since BSE was first identified in the United Kingdom, USDA has taken measures in surveillance, prevention, education, and response. No cases of BSE have been confirmed in the

U.S. despite years of active surveillance. However, consumers—as represented by Meat and Poultry Hotline callers—still worry about the risk of contracting a form of the disease from eating beef. In 1997, the Hotline noted 125 inquiries pertaining to BSE.

Several events during the year focused attention on this issue and influenced the nature of Hotline calls. One was the release in March of survey results by FSIS about the performance of Advanced Meat Recovery (AMR) systems. Some consumer and industry representatives had raised concerns about the potential risk to human health from the consumption of bovine spinal cord due to the possible link between BSE and variant Creutzfeld-Jakob (vCJD) disease in humans. Government scientists and public health experts agreed there is no evidence of BSE or vCJD in this country. However, FSIS declared the presence of spinal cord in meat is not expected and cannot be allowed in product produced through AMR systems.

Media coverage was also fueling BSE concern at the time; author Richard Rhodes was promoting his book, *Deadly Feasts*, and talk show host Oprah Winfrey was being sued over the content of her April 1996 program on BSE. In other news, USDA acted in 1997 to prohibit importation of live ruminants and most ruminant products from Europe. USDA supported the Food and Drug Administration regulation prohibiting the use of most mammalian protein in the manufacture of animal feeds given to ruminants. The issue of ruminant feeding was mentioned frequently by Hotline callers with BSE concerns.

Color as an Indicator of Doneness in Cooked Ground Beef

FSIS has long advised that the first and best indicator of safely cooked ground beef is an internal temperature of at least 160 °F. However, food thermometer use is by no means universal. Prior to June 1997, FSIS advised consumers who did not use a food thermometer to cook ground beef patties until the center and the cooked-out juices were no longer pink. Consumers were also advised to look for a firm "cooked" texture rather than a softer "raw or rare" texture in the meat.

Research results raised questions regarding the suggestions for the visual checks for doneness. Some ground beef may appear to have lost all pink color before it is fully and safely cooked. Consequently, in June 1997, FSIS issued a press release advising consumers to use a food thermometer when cooking ground beef patties, and not to rely on the internal color of the meat. Rather, consumers should cook ground beef patties to 160 °F.

Since there were conflicting points of view on this issue among the food safety community, the Meat and Poultry Hotline did receive approximately 100 questions about the use of a thermometer when cooking hamburgers and other ground beef dishes.

After reviewing existing research, FSIS initiated its own study to survey the prevalence of premature browning in cooked ground beef. Members of the Hotline and the Food Safety Education and Communications Staff were instrumental in devising the study protocol and presenting the findings and implications for consumer education through several public meetings. The Staff also contracted for and guided focus group research aimed at discovering barriers to thermometer use.

Campylobacter jejuni

The most prevalent of foodborne pathogens is, to consumers, one of the lesser known organisms. The FSIS/CDC/FDA Sentinel Site Study conducted in 1996 identified *Campylobacter* as the most frequently isolated bacterium from persons with diarrhea. The study, a collaborative project that FSIS began in 1995 with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the FDA, is now known as the Foodborne Diseases Active Surveillance Network, or "FoodNet." As a result of FoodNet findings, there is a heightened awareness that more studies of this pathogen are needed to determine the risk factors for infection and antibiotic resistance patterns among *Campylobacter* strains.

This heightened awareness prompted an estimated 95 inquiries to the Hotline over the course of the year. Many of them were prompted by reports in the *New York Times* and on NBC's *Today* show.

Irradiation of Red Meat

On December 2, 1997, FDA approved irradiation of fresh and frozen red meat, such as beef, lamb, and pork, to control foodborne pathogens. FSIS then began development of its implementing regulations. This was one of the grounds for renewed interest among Hotline callers in food irradiation; 128 irradiation inquiries were received.

A small number of callers wanted to voice support for irradiation; a slightly larger proportion registered their opposition. Most of the callers were seeking information about the process and its application to a variety of food products.

Irradiation can offer consumers safer foods by controlling or reducing microbial pathogens that cause foodborne illness. Therefore, the subject logically arose in connection with reports of *E. coli* O157:H7 contamination of ground beef. The subject of irradiation also figured prominently in the debate over organic labeling. The public comment period for the National Organic Program proposed rule began December 16, 1997. As part of its rulemaking, USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service requested public comment on the subject of irradiation of organic products in order to evaluate its compatibility with the principles of organic handling.

Seasonal Questions—Thanksgiving

Safety of the Thanksgiving turkey dinner was the number one concern of callers to the Meat and Poultry Hotline. Through a contractual arrangement with a service bureau, the Hotline expanded its call-handling capacity during Thanksgiving week, traditionally the busiest week of the year. From November 24-30, the Hotline received 52,771 calls. Most callers heard a list of key food handling tips; some chose one of seven recorded food safety messages developed just for the holiday season. During the week, approximately 1,500 callers spoke with a food safety specialist (311 on Thanksgiving Day). The total number of Hotline calls for the month of November was 63,793.

Since demand for the Hotline is always heavy in the days prior to Thanksgiving, the Hotline distributed safe handling information to consumers through a number of other channels. The

Hotline manager and other staff members granted several television interviews during November. These included an appearance on The Cable News Network Thanksgiving morning to address last-minute food safety concerns, as well as several appearances on local television stations to discuss prevention of *Salmonella* food poisoning. Those interviews were requested following an outbreak of illness in Maryland that affected several hundred church supper patrons.

A news release, a feature released through North American Precis Syndicate (NAPS), and live radio interviews were also part of the holiday food safety campaign. The NAPS feature, *Keeping Food Safe for Late Dinner Guests*, was picked up by at least 920 newspapers in 30 states with a combined circulation of 48.8 million.

Flooding and Power Outages

Each year, the Meat and Poultry Hotline assists many callers who have been affected by storms, power failures, and natural disasters. These consumers need help in determining whether the foods stored in their refrigerator, freezer, or pantry are still safe to consume. The year 1997 was no exception, with more than 1,200 power-failure inquiries recorded by specialists. (Other callers used the automated message system to obtain information after hours.)

A higher than usual number of these emergency situations involved flooding. For example, in May 1997, the Hotline received 15 calls about flood-contaminated foods from North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota.

Dioxin Contamination

In July, reports emerged that elevated dioxin levels were found in 2 of 80 poultry samples analyzed through the Survey of Dioxin-Like Compounds in Poultry conducted by FSIS and EPA. The dioxin was traced back to ball clay from a single mine that was used as a feed additive. Even though there was no immediate public health problem, 14 people called the Meat and Poultry Hotline with questions about dioxins.

The Hotline noted another cluster of calls in September. A small amount of chicken purchased for the Child Nutrition Programs was implicated, and USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (formerly known as Food and Consumer Service) asked that states and school systems destroy their remaining inventories of suspect product. This prompted questions about the disposition of the product and about dioxin contamination in general.

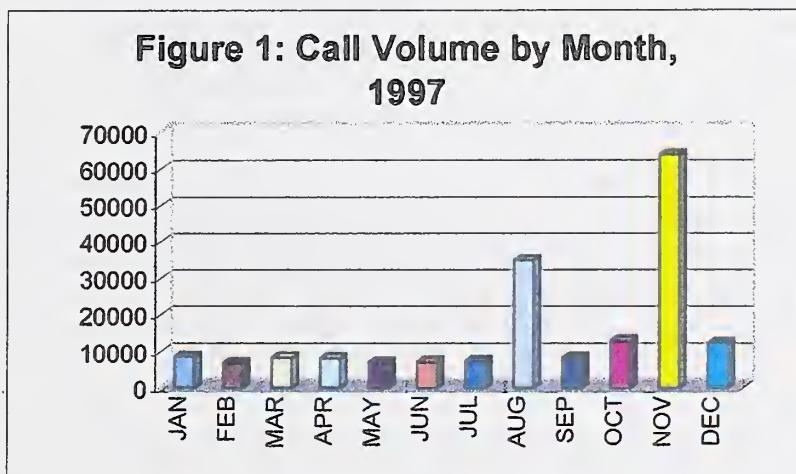
FSIS determined through its investigation of the incident that the problem had been resolved.

Facts and Figures

This section presents facts and figures about all the Hotline calls and inquiries received in 1997.

Call Volume

Between January 1 and December 31, 1997, the Meat and Poultry Hotline received 185,015 calls. The number of calls was much higher than normal, because the Hotline twice contracted its services to an outside provider in order to augment its capacity.



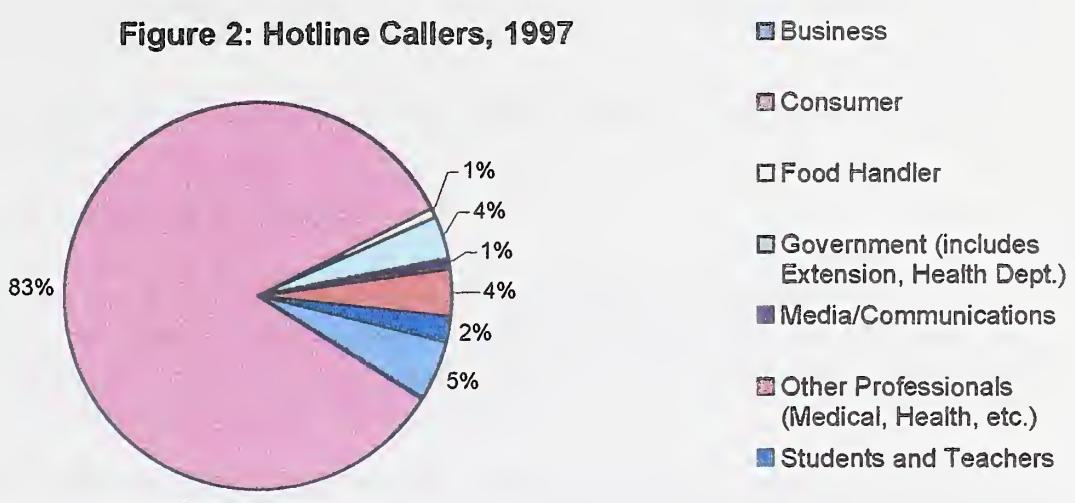
The Hotline's telephone service was managed by a contractor in late August-early September and late November; the effect on call distribution is seen in figure 1. August and November were the busiest months of the year, with 19 and 34 percent of the calls respectively.

All Hotline callers do not use the service during business hours when the lines are staffed; therefore, the number of callers who spoke to a food safety specialist—and had their concerns documented—is less than the total number of incoming calls. The remaining statistics in this report are based on the records of 37,076 calls that encompass 38,878 inquiries. (One person's "call" may include several distinct "inquiries" on different topics.)

Hotline Callers

As in 1996, 83 percent of Meat and Poultry Hotline callers were presumed to be calling as interested consumers. The remaining 17 percent identified themselves to a specialist as part of a particular audience (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Hotline Callers, 1997



The Hotline's business and professional clients include educators and communicators; government officials; registered dietitians; home economists; Extension agents; health professionals; consumer affairs professionals; and representatives of FSIS' regulated entities. These callers—especially the media callers whose audiences can number in the millions—allow the Hotline's recommendations to reach a vast number of consumers, not just those who call the Hotline themselves.

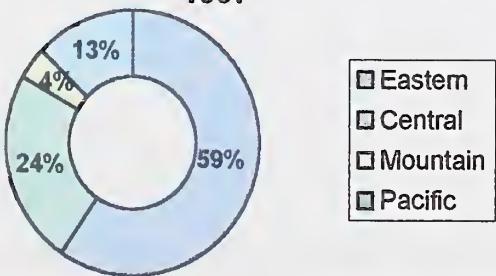
Since media callers may contact the Hotline manager directly, rather than going through the Hotline itself, the actual number of media calls is somewhat higher than figure 2 indicates. There were 574 media or "information multiplier" calls in 1997. Calls came from newspapers (164), magazines (178), radio stations (56), television stations (50), newsletters (21), and various other organizations (105).

Callers' Home States

As a centralized service, the Meat and Poultry Hotline is able to compare calls received from different regions of the country. The Hotline in 1997 received calls from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, and foreign countries. The distribution of the calls from the United

States is shown in figure 3; the named regions are roughly equivalent to time zones. The Eastern zone—largest in terms of population and number of states—produced 59 percent of the calls; the Central region, 24 percent; the Mountain region, 4 percent; and the Pacific region, 13 percent.

Figure 3: Callers' Home States, 1997



Two-thirds of the calls originated from 1 of the following 12 states, listed in descending order: New

York, California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, Texas, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, Maryland, Massachusetts, and Virginia.

There were 26 calls from countries other than the United States, including Canada, Ireland, Austria, and England.

How Callers Learned of the Hotline

As in 1996, 34 percent of Hotline customers were repeat callers. For first-time callers, the sources of the Hotline telephone number were recorded. Print media were the most used tools, although an increasing variety of communications channels—including books and World Wide Web sites—led callers to the Meat and Poultry Hotline.

The specific sources mentioned most often were newspapers (about 16 percent of first-time callers); miscellaneous print and electronic media, including books, pamphlets, and the Internet (14 percent); radio and television (11 percent); and directories (10 percent). The number of callers who learned of the Hotline through radio or television more than doubled compared to 1996. This increase was due to (a) extensive media coverage of a nationwide ground beef recall and (b) repeated broadcasts of a cable television show urging viewers to call the Hotline for food storage information.

Figure 4: Source of Hotline Number, 1997

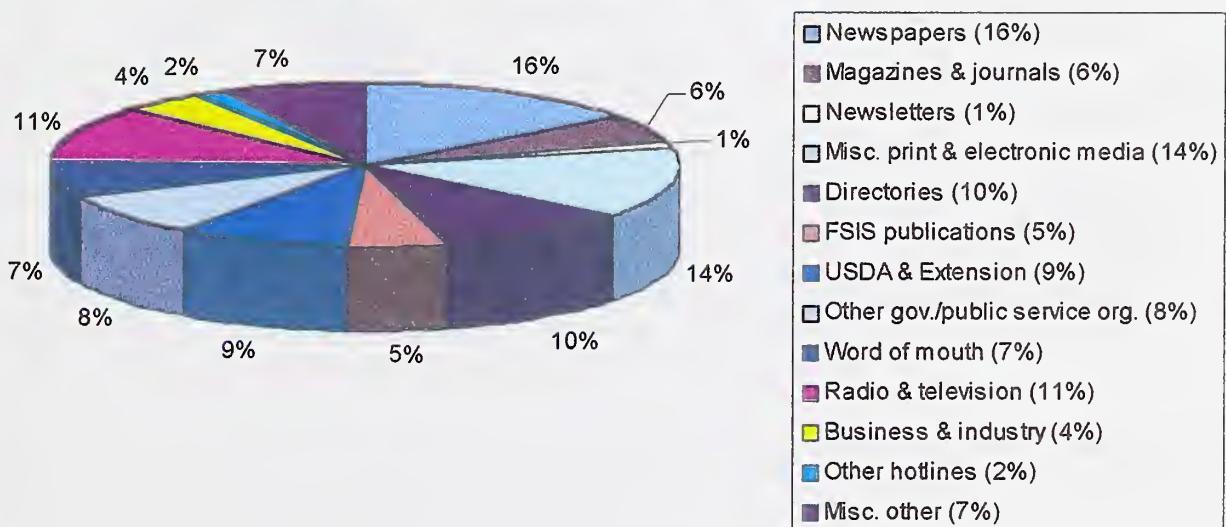


Figure 4 shows the various means by which callers learned about the Meat and Poultry Hotline.

Types of Inquiries

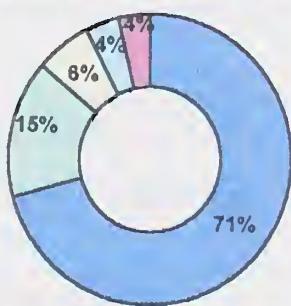
The Meat and Poultry Hotline is one channel through which consumer complaints reach FSIS' Office of Public Health and Science, Food Hazard Surveillance Division, where complaint investigation is managed. Relatively few Meat and Poultry Hotline calls qualify as complaints. In 1997, 641 inquiries—fewer than 2 percent—were categorized as complaints. Of these, 159 were referred for formal Agency investigation. The remaining 482 complaints were of a more general nature, or needed to be referred to the FDA or a local health department for action.

Among formal complaints, allegations of foreign objects were most frequent, followed by reports of alleged illness or injury. Informal complaints most often concerned alleged foreign objects, product appearance, alleged illness or injury, or conditions at a grocery store or restaurant.

Subject of Inquiry

As figure 5 indicates, most Hotline inquiries pertain to safe food storage, handling, and preparation. This type of query, along with publication requests and general questions about foodborne illness, accounted for 71 percent of inquiries in 1997. This is consistent with data from previous years; basic food safety questions have traditionally accounted for approximately 70 percent of all inquiries.

Figure 5: General Subjects of Inquiry, 1997



- Storage/Handling
- Marketing/Inspection
- Product Condition; Establishment Practice
- Labeling/Nutrition
- Other

Fifteen percent of inquiries—up from 12 percent in 1996—dealt with food marketing and inspection issues. For example, callers asked about the actions of the regulatory agencies: meat, poultry, and egg product inspection; HACCP implementation; product recalls; product

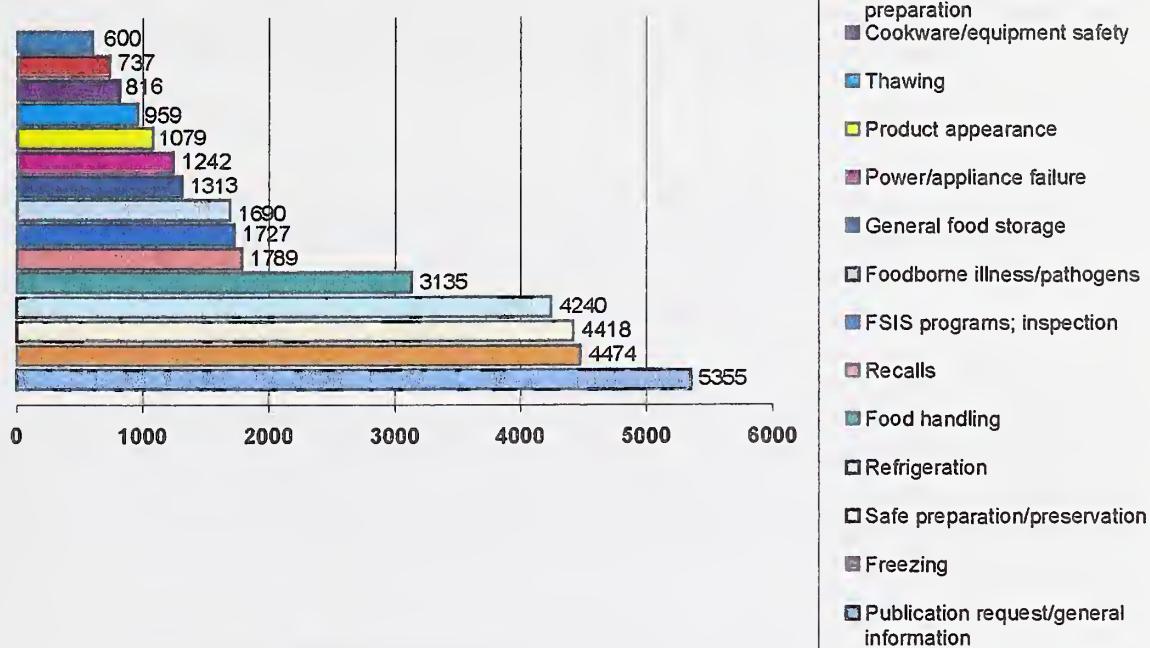
formulations; etc. Purchasing decisions also raised safety questions for consumers; they inquired about packaging, cooking equipment and housewares, agricultural chemical use, food additives, quality grading, animal husbandry practices, and food biotechnology.

Approximately 6 percent of inquiries dealt with products and practices that failed to meet the caller's expectations. Examples are products in "off" or suspect condition, practices in grocery stores, and practices in foodservice establishments.

Four percent of inquiries pertained to labeling (ingredient, nutrition, etc.), product dating, or basic nutrition. The remaining 4 percent of inquiries reflected other concerns and included referrals for questions outside the Hotline and FSIS mission area.

The year's top 15 subjects of inquiry are shown in more specific terms in figure 6.

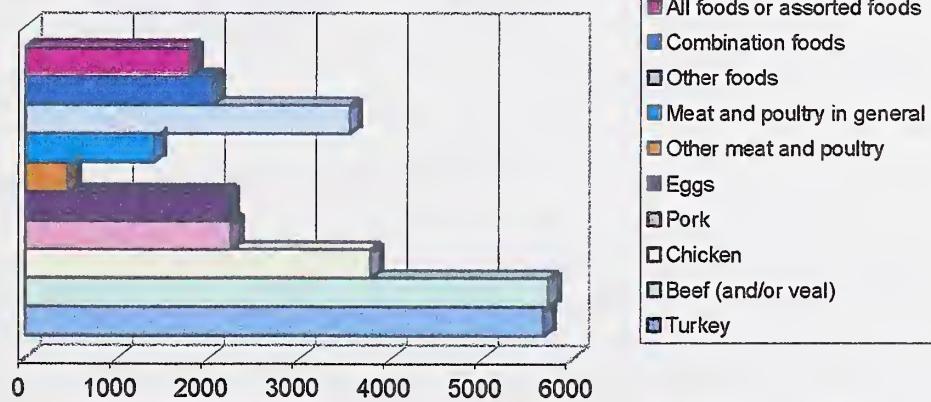
Figure 6: Specific Subjects of Inquiry, 1997



Inquiries by Food Product Category

Seventy-four percent of inquiries were associated with a specific food or class of product. Figure 7 depicts this group of inquiries.

Figure 7: Food-specific Inquiries by Product Category, 1997



Sixty-eight percent of the product-specific inquiries concerned turkey, beef and/or veal, chicken, pork, or eggs/egg products.

The typical seasonal

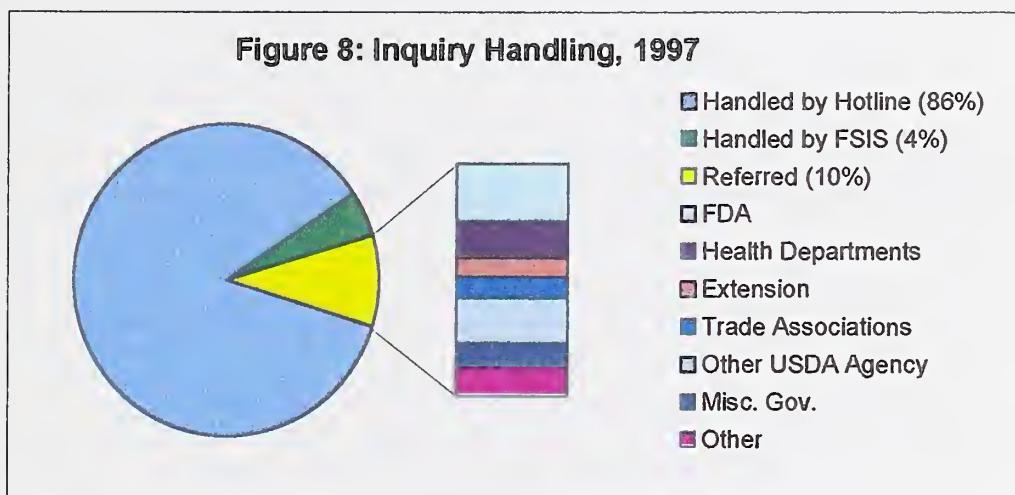
variations were evident. Turkey calls prevailed in November and December; pork and egg questions were more frequent in the spring; chicken and beef questions dominated the summer grilling and picnic season.

The Meat and Poultry Hotline does address questions about products other than meat, poultry and egg products. The principles of safe handling are the same for all foods, and generally other foods are prepared alongside meat and poultry dishes. However, questions about other products are referred to the responsible regulatory agency when necessary. Most often, the responsible agency is the FDA or a local health department. (See "Call Management," below.)

Call Management

The Hotline's information specialists maintain contact with experts in FSIS and many other agencies in order to provide the best, most current information to consumers. As a result, the Hotline staff resolved most inquiries on the first contact. Approximately 4 percent of inquiries were referred to another arm of FSIS; the remaining 10 percent were referred to other agencies.

In many cases, referrals were made to one of five places: FDA, which regulates foods other than meat, poultry, and egg products; other agencies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture; state or local health departments, responsible for grocery stores and foodservice establishments; the Cooperative Extension System, a grass-roots educational program co-sponsored by USDA and each state's land grant university; or industry trade associations. Call handling is illustrated in figure 8.



Day-to-Day Operation of the Hotline

The Meat and Poultry Hotline is one part of FSIS' overall consumer education program. In support of that program, Hotline specialists assumed many responsibilities in addition to answering calls. The staff researched and wrote a number of publications based on calls to the Hotline, which were distributed in print, electronically, and as part of quarterly mailings to newspaper food and health editors, magazine editors, and consumer affairs professionals. Key pieces of advice were the subjects of print and video news releases.

Staff members served as subject matter experts on specific food safety issues. This responsibility entailed conducting literature searches, attending professional meetings and seminars, establishing alliances with experts across the country, and developing publications and internal

callers, specialists gave speeches and presentations at conventions, professional meetings, and in a variety of other settings.

The Hotline worked closely with other government agencies to carry out its mission. Hotline staff, along with other members of the Food Safety Education and Communications Staff, worked to plan and conduct the first national conference devoted to exploring new strategies for educating consumers about food safety. The 2-day conference, held in June 1997, drew 500 people. It was co-sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, FDA, and CDC.

The specialists that staffed the Meat and Poultry Hotline in 1997, all of whom have a number of years of experience on the Hotline, bring a variety of work and educational experiences to their jobs. The staff includes home economics and nutrition teachers, public health and community nutrition experts, microwave cooking and appliance specialists, journalists, and registered dietitians with nursing home and hospital experience.

For More Information

USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline may be reached by calling:

- 1-800-535-4555 (voice),
- 202-720-3333 (Washington, DC metropolitan area), or
- 1-800-256-7072 (TTY).

Callers may speak with a food safety specialist between 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday through Friday. Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day.

Meat and Poultry Hotline Staff

Marva Adams

Marva Adams, home economist, joined the Hotline staff in 1993. She has taught public school, worked as a consumer advisor for a major utility company in Washington, DC, and been a homemaker. She has a bachelor of science degree in home economics education from the University of Tennessee.

Sara Beck

Sara Beck joined the Hotline staff in October 1990. In prior years, she has been a consultant in the Washington, DC, area in the fields of food, marketing, and communications. She received a bachelor of science degree in home economics from Catawba College in Salisbury, NC, and a master of science degree in home economics and communications from the University of Maryland. She has worked as a home economist with a North Carolina utility company, nutrition advisor to the executive chef of the Pentagon cafeterias, and a home economist/consumer specialist conducting a nationwide consumer information program for the inspection and grading services of USDA. In addition to handling Hotline calls and other responsibilities related to consumer education—i.e., researching and writing articles—Ms. Beck continues her consulting work and is also writing a cookbook.

Katherine H. Bernard

Kathy Bernard joined the Hotline staff in April 1992. Her previous work experience includes 8 years with the National Food Processor's Association (NFPA), where she examined exhibits involved in consumer claims. This work included performing bacteriological examinations of food products, and evaluating food product container integrity. Ms. Bernard received a bachelor of science degree in biology from The American University in Washington, DC, and a master of science degree in food science from the University of Maryland in College Park, MD. She is a professional member of the Institute of Food Technologists.

Bessie Jones Berry

Bessie Jones Berry has been with the Meat and Poultry Hotline since 1986. She is the manager of the Hotline with responsibilities for the duties of one public affairs specialist and nine full-time and part-time home economists, dietitians and food technologists who answer Hotline phones. She serves as media spokesperson for the Meat and Poultry Hotline and is featured on radio and television; and is frequently quoted in newspaper and magazine articles. She has a bachelor of science degree in home economics from the University of Maryland, and a master of science degree in consumer affairs from Howard University in Washington, DC, which included an internship in the White House Office of Consumer Affairs. She has taught foods and nutrition courses in public schools.

Marilyn Johnston

Marilyn Johnston has been with the Hotline since May 1987. Her background includes teaching home economics and serving as home service advisor to two major electric utilities in Indiana. She is an expert in microwave cooking, having worked for 12 years for a major microwave company. She received her bachelor of science degree from Purdue University, with a major in foods and business home economics. She is an active member of Electrical Women's Roundtable.

Sandy King

Sandy King graduated from the University of Maryland with a bachelor of science degree in home economics. She then worked at a Washington, DC, utility company as a home economist. After leaving the electric company, Ms. King taught microwave cooking for Amana, General Electric, Thermador, and Jennair. Ms. King has also been a manufacturer's representative for a number of cookware lines, demonstrating products at conventions, dealer shows, and stores. She was employed for 2 years by a kitchen design firm and has also worked coordinating conventions and programs in the Washington, DC area. Ms. King joined the Meat and Poultry Hotline in 1993.

Robyn Sadagursky, R.D., L.D.

Robyn Sadagursky received a bachelor of arts degree from Brooklyn College and a master of arts degree in management and supervision from Central Michigan University. A registered, licensed dietitian, her experience includes consulting in a hospital and numerous long-term care facilities. In addition, she has been employed as a renal dietitian and a foodservice director. She is an active member of the American Dietetic Association. Ms. Sadagursky has been with the Hotline since 1992.

Diane VanLonkhuyzen

Diane VanLonkhuyzen, home economist, has a varied background in the field that includes a position as consumer advisor to a major utility company in the Washington, DC, area. For 9 years she ran a test kitchen, developing recipes for the company's cookbook and conducting cooking and energy conservation demonstrations in the community. Ms. VanLonkhuyzen has also served as consultant to numerous appliance manufacturers. She has been with the Hotline since September 1986, and has a bachelor of science degree in home economics from the University of Maryland. Ms. VanLonkhuyzen coordinates a variety of special projects for the Hotline.

Mary Wenberg, R.D.

Mary Wenberg received a bachelor of science degree in foods and nutrition from Ohio University. She completed a dietetic internship and earned a master of science degree from Ohio State University. A registered, licensed dietitian, her experience includes hospitals, university teaching, and school foodservice. Ms. Wenberg was professionally employed in Ohio, West Virginia, Minnesota, and Texas before moving to the Washington, DC, area. She is an active member of the American Dietetic Association and has been with the Hotline since 1989.

CiCi Williamson

Home economist CiCi Williamson brings expertise in the field of microwave cooking to the Hotline. In addition to answering consumer calls, she is a syndicated newspaper columnist, author of five cookbooks, and a book editor. Ms. Williamson has written almost 2,000 food articles that have appeared in professional journals, women's magazines and hundreds of newspapers. She has taught microwave seminars for 18 years and is a speaker at major food conferences. Ms. Williamson is past president of the National Capital Area Home Economists in Business, the International Microwave Power Institute's Consumer Appliance Section, and Les Dames d'Escoffier. She has also served as a board member of the Association of Food Journalists. Her bachelor of science degree in home economics education is from the University of Maryland. Ms. Williamson has been a technical information specialist with USDA's Hotline since 1988.

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